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ABSTRACT

This booklet presents an overview of the growing demands for adult education, as well as other social services, because education is seen to play a vital role in enabling the growing population of older people to remain independent and lead more fulfilling lives. It reports on the following issues: the educational needs and demands of older people, the current education policies for older people in various countries and regions, and the planning of future approaches and activities at the regional and international levels. The booklet concludes that older adults have wisdom that should be valued and that efforts need to be directed towards overcoming an image of the elderly as distinct and different from the rest of society. It recommends that governments make adult education for the elderly a priority and that older people be given the right to make decisions about their own learning. (KC)

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ED 435 015

A series of 29 booklets documenting workshops held at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education

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8a Ageing populations

Adult learning and ageing populations

CE 079 201

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This publication has been produced by the UNESCO Institute for Education within the context of the follow-up to the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), held in Hamburg in 1997.

Readers are reminded that the points of view, selection of facts, and the opinions expressed in the booklets are those that were raised by panellists, speakers and participants during the workshop sessions and therefore do not necessarily coincide with official positions of the UNESCO or of the UNESCO Institute for Education Hamburg. The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the UNESCO Secretariat concerning the legal status of any country or territory, or its authorities, or concerning the delimitations of the frontiers of any country or territory.

Theme 8: Adult learning and groups with special needs
Booklets under this theme:
8a Adult learning and ageing populations
8b Migrant education
8c Adult learning for prisoners
8d Making education accessible and available to all persons with disabilities

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Foreword

In July 1997 the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education was held in Hamburg, organised by UNESCO and in particular the UNESCO Institute for Education, the agency's specialist centre on adult learning policy and research. Approximately 1500 delegates attended from all regions of the world, with representatives of 140 member states and some 400 NGOs. In addition to the work of the commissions and plenary which debated the official documents of the Conference The Hamburg Declaration and The Agenda for the Future, there were 33 workshops organised around the themes and sub-themes of the Conference.

As part of its CONFINTEA follow-up strategy, the UNESCO Institute for Education has produced this series of 29 booklets based on the presentations and discussions held during the Conference. The recordings of all the workshops were transcribed and synthesized over one year, edited, and then formatted and designed. A tremendous amount of work has gone into this process. Linda King, coordinator of the monitoring and information strategy for CONFINTEA, was responsible for overseeing the whole process. Madhu Singh, senior research specialist at UIE, undertook the mammoth task of writing almost all the booklets based on an analysis of the sessions. She was helped in the later stages by Gonzalo Retamal, Uta Papen and Linda King. Christopher McIntosh was technical editor, Matthew Partridge designed the layout and Janna Lowrey was both transcriber and translator.

The booklets are intended to draw out the central issues and concerns of each of the CONFINTEA workshops. They are the memory of an event that marked an important watershed in the field of adult learning. We hope that they will be of use both to those who were able to attend CONFINTEA V and those who were not. We look forward to your comments, feedback and continuing collaboration with the UNESCO Institute for Education.

Paul Bélanger,
Director, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg
and Secretary General of CONFINTEA

Adult learning and ageing populations

Introduction

Everywhere in the world, in both developed and developing countries, population patterns are changing and people can now expect to live much longer than they did 50 years ago. Consequently, there is a growing demand for adult education as well as other social services as it is realised that education can play a vital role in enabling older people to remain independent, to keep up with changes in society and to make their lives more fulfilling.

This booklet highlights the main issues raised at the workshop "Adult Learning and Ageing Populations" held during the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education in Hamburg in July 1997. The purpose of this workshop was to discuss issues relating to the educational needs and demands of older people, to examine current education policies for older people in various countries and regions, and to plan future approaches and activities at the regional and international levels. The workshop – the first on this issue ever run at the conference – also focused on special education projects for older people and on the broader question of how to increase governments' awareness of older people's educational needs.

Prior to the conference, a discussion guide on "Learning and ageing populations" had been drawn up at a meeting organised by the European Association for Adult Education (EAEA). The workshop itself was chaired by Lesley Hart, Senior Studies Institute, University of Strathclyde, Scotland; Huib Hinnekint, Centrum voor Andragogisch Onderzoek, Belgium and Alex Withnall, University of Keele. The panel of speakers consisted of Nelly Schwarz, Adult Education Council of Latin America (CEAAL-ANOS, Chile); Alistair Crombie, Australian Association for Adult and Community Education; David Lance, Bilan University, Israel; Yosep

Rochera, International Federation of Senior Citizens Associations (FIAPA), Rosa Maria Falgas (ICAE-EAEA), Spain; Theresa Lodetti, European Federation of Pensioners and Older People, Italy; Noel Ray, International Federation of Third Age Associations (FIAPA, France).

A commitment to older people's education is only starting to gain momentum and much remains to be done both in the area of advocacy and in the development of appropriate learning possibilities towards giving older people the attention they deserve.

The workshop on "Adult Learning and Ageing Populations" was part of this growing movement. Another major step forward which will provide important opportunities to bring older people's concerns to the forefront is the fact that the United Nations has declared the year 1999 "The Year of Older People".

The context: An ageing world

More than 25 per cent of the adult population are aged 60 years or older. In some regions this proportion is expected to rise to about 40 per cent due to better conditions of health, wealth and education.

It is estimated that between 1990 and the year 2030 the number of people aged 60 and over will have tripled world-wide. Persons aged 65 or older will increase from 155 to 325 million in developing countries, and from 131 to 188 million in the developed countries. While the rates of increase are lower in the South, this is compensated by the higher overall population growth in these countries.

During 1995, the world's population of over 60s increased by more than 12 million with nearly 80% of this increase occurring in less-developed countries.

In Latin America, the number of people older than 60 was 20 million in 1975. It is estimated that in 2025 there will be 95 million people aged 60 and over. This growth is the result of increased life expectancy.

Life expectancy rates are also different between the sexes with the result that among older adults women outnumber men. At the age of 60, the male/female ratio is 99 males to 100 females. At the age of 80 and over, there are only 69 males for every 100 females.

The increase in the proportion of older people to the general population everywhere in the world is a clear indicator of the changing age structure of our populations.

The situation of older people in contemporary society

Older people should not be considered a homogenous group. Indeed, this section of society can be characterised by its heterogeneity. Many are fit and active, but a large proportion of older adults, mainly those living in poor conditions, are threatened by isolation, poverty, social exclusion and loss of human dignity. In both developed and developing countries many older people live in poverty and are denied access to proper health care and other basic services. They are marginalised within their own families, by their communities and by the larger society.

For many older people in the world earning a living after officially retiring from work is a necessity rather than just a desire to remain active and productive in the later part of life: State pensions are often too small to allow for a decent living and many older citizens depend on their families and friends for support. However, the type of employment open to older citizens is often marginal and characterised by low pay and little or no job security.

In some countries, older people are more respected by their families and communities but severe poverty combined with ill health may nevertheless prevent them from taking a more active role in the community or in social life. These elderly people may be home-bound and unable to travel long distances in order to see a doctor or a nurse. Many people have no pension and have to find other ways to ensure economic security. Ensuring their survival is the biggest concern of these older people.

Compared to the younger generations, the majority of older citizens have lower levels of formal education. This is even more true of older women. The level of functional illiteracy among older people is relatively high compared to illiteracy levels among the younger generations. The lack of reading and writing skills makes it difficult for older people to gain access to information and services. It often makes them more dependent on others for help. They might, for example, need to be helped with understanding a drug prescription.

A limited view of their situation and lack of information

Younger generations have rather limited views about older people and their way of life. Older citizens are often portrayed as passive and dependent. They are considered a social and economic burden to society. Not many seem to be aware of the difficult conditions of life older people often have to face. Their contributions to their families, their communities and to society at large often go unrecognised.

Despite the more positive view of the physical and cognitive abilities in old age now being advocated by medical science and gerontology, many people still believe that old age means pathological biological decay and loss of intellectual capacity. Even social science disciplines have looked at older citizens as being dependent and lacking the capacity to be self-supporting. Such deficit notions still dominate public opinion and policy-making.

In the field of education, older people are often assumed to be a difficult clientele. They are believed to be slow and passive learners, and lacking memory in their learning process.

Education project for older citizens in Chile

This programme provides basic education, health education and organisational skills training for older men and women in the capital Santiago and in the southern rural areas of the country.

- The participants organise themselves in groups.
- The main aim is to improve social participation of older people.

The groups are given training for one year, after which they will continue to work together on their own.

A major difficulty when trying to lobby for older people's concerns is the lack of information about their situation. Research results from the few studies that are available show that older people have a variety of livelihood strategies.

Help Age International, UK
is a network of independent organisations in developed and developing countries working with older people. It has initiated a research project on the contributions older people make to development in Africa. Focuses on:

- the livelihood strategies of disadvantaged older people;
- the perceptions of wellbeing;
- the contributions of older people to family and community;
- the issue of the lack of information on older people, including their educational needs;
- influencing social policy discussion and policy-making on ageing in Africa and other developing countries.

It is planned that in a second phase, similar research will be carried out in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Making people aware of the situation of older people through research and information campaigns is an urgent task which needs to be addressed by both governments and the public. Although the demographic changes are now being recognised, the implications of these changes are still a matter of much debate. Among policy-makers, the discussion has been dominated by concerns about the financial costs to society. The main question being raised, especially in industrialised countries, is how publicly funded pensions, welfare and health care can be secured. Governments are emphasising the need for reforms in the pension system. Such reforms often mean a reduction of state support for older people. At the same time, governments are openly encouraging younger citizens to invest in private pensions schemes.

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Towards a more positive view on ageing

Many older people in both developed and developing countries are actively involved in productive life far beyond the official age of retirement, in various types of voluntary and non-remunerated work. Others contribute to easing the workload of their families by taking care of daily housework. It is also very common for older people to take on an important role in the education of their grandchildren.

The notion of retirement does not make much sense in many economies where the boundaries between formal employment and informal sector activity are more fluid, with many people at all ages out of formal employment for long periods of their lives, or self-employed.

Older generations make significant contributions to the subsistence of their families. A survey among older people in a township in Durban, South Africa, has revealed that almost all of those participating in the survey who received a state pension shared this income with their families. Since unemployment rates are high in the township, the pension is often the only income for a family with several children and grandchildren. This forces elderly people to use their pensions to help their families survive. (OPL, Participatory Needs Assessment, MUSA, Durban, South Africa, 1996).

The amount of work older family members are responsible for can be significant. In countries with a high rate of labour migration and urbanisation, migration to urban areas can put additional pressure on the older people who remain in the rural areas. Where HIV and Aids are a major problem, older people are particularly affected as they often have to take over as carers and economic providers for their adult children and orphaned grandchildren.

Older people also play an active role in communal and societal affairs. They engage in a variety of tasks and new activities, playing a crucial role in local decision-making processes and holding important responsibilities as members of local committees which address development issues. A more positive view of the Third Age is thus highly appropriate and urgently needs to be promoted.

Within adult education, it is important to build on the positive aspects of ageing, on older people's involvement and experience and their potential for development and a fulfilling life in old age. Adult education has a lot to contribute to supporting active and successful ageing.

Where older adults are involved in education programmes, the experience has been positive. Older people possess a range of learning skills from prior experience, and they are no less active and motivated learners than younger people. Studies on learning capacity have shown no major decline in learning capacity before the age of 75. Most older adults can achieve high levels of intellectual capacity. Their ability to learn does not decrease, nor does it necessarily remain static. In some cases, learning abilities can even increase. Illness may sometimes be an obstacle to learning, but this need not always be the case. Most older people today are relatively healthy and some difficulties, such as sight problems for older literacy learners, can be overcome quite easily. Literacy programmes for older people are, in fact, an interesting way to illustrate the often wrong assumptions about older people's learning abilities for they have shown that the older participants are as persistent in their learning as their younger co-learners and equally successful.

New notions of active and successful ageing and the positive view of older people and their contributions to society need to be applied in the design and implementation of programmes. It is necessary to recognise the creative potential of older citizens, their capacity to learn and to engage in new activities, their enthusiasm and their willingness to contribute to improving their quality of life. They are a positive force in the community.

Education and welfare policies

Growing demand for education

There is a growing demand by men and women aged 60 and over for a more active life and the fact that education has a major role to play is being increasingly recognised. Organisations of older people, such as Age Concern in the UK, provide services for older people, develop their own local initiatives and network with similar groups. Such local initiatives create a demand for various forms of training and education, including training in organisational issues for members of local groups or skills training for income-generation and supporting local carers.

The Australian Association of Adult and Community Education received a grant from the government in 1995 to undertake policy research into third age learning in Australia. The research report contained the demographic facts of life among older people in Australia; an extensive national and international literature review of the research available on older adults and learning; and policy recommendations.

The research was initiated as part of a response to the growing recognition in Australian society of the demographic changes which started to become obvious in the 70s and 80s. In the beginning, financial issues, such as the growing problems of pension provision and of meeting health needs of older people were in the forefront. But lately there has been growing interest from the Education Ministry in the contribution of Third Age learning to successful ageing. There are strong indicators that sustained cognitive inquiry and intellectual activity is correlated with greater self-esteem and self-reliance.

In 1997, the Association formulated its own policy for Third Age learning. The fundamental axiom of this policy is that this learning should be under the control of Third Age people. In an attempt to put this policy into practice, a Third Age person has been nominated to the executive of the Association and is responsible for the learning programme. At the regional level, the Association, which is an active member of the Asia-South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE), has offered to become the lead agency to develop a network among organisations working with older people throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Many organisations such as Help Age International also devote a lot of their efforts to advocacy and lobbying activities for they are aware of the importance of getting the support of the general public and the politicians, and making the needs and contributions of older people more widely known.

Education for older people should no longer be confined to the margins and, indeed, there are many interesting and innovative activities going on in this field. In Australia, for example, the situation of older people is now receiving the increasing attention by the government: Australia is one of the few countries which has a law to protect older people from discrimination. Policy-makers are also beginning to see the link between an intellectually and psychologically fulfilled life in old age and sustained good health.

Similar surveys to the one just described are being conducted in other countries. There is increasing co-operation between non-governmental organisations, universities and governments in developing joint activities.

New experiences with education programmes for older persons

Merely providing access is insufficient. Older people need specific learning programmes, different from the education opportunities open to younger citizens. Education should not only be for, but also with and by older participants.

The fact that older people are often seen as dependent and lacking initiative and determination may lead to education programmes being conceived in a top-down, patronising manner which give learners no opportunity to set their own priorities or make their own decisions. It is not unusual for older people to hold such views themselves. Many have little faith in their own ability to learn and feel that they need to be taught in a very structured way.

Despite such difficulties, older people are more often than not motivated to learn. They have very clear ideas about what and how they want to learn and often express their demands. Some even take the initiative and set up their own learning structures.

"Learning in Later Life programme" University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

In 1987, the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, initiated a pilot programme with daytime classes for older adults. The founders of the initiative "older people only" were aware of the fact that very few older adults participated in the regular programme of adult evening classes. The new programme was entitled Learning in Later Life and aimed at the 50+ age group. In 1987 it started with only 200 learners. This year there are about 2000 participants. The biggest increase in participants is among the age group of 50 to 59, reflecting the trend for early retirement in Scotland.

In 1988, the Learning in Later Life Students Association was set up following an initiative by the older learners themselves. Because they enjoyed the classes so much, they wanted to continue meeting over the summer period when the university classes stopped. As a result, the older learners founded their own association. It now has about 750 members and organises a range of cultural and social activities, study trips, and outings. The Students Association runs 14 different learning clubs, which are self-organised and independent from the more formal Learning in Later Life programme. Creative writing or urban walking are two examples of learning clubs.

The Older People's Literacy Project in Durban, South Africa

This literacy programme for older citizens in a township of Durban was set up in 1997 by the Muthande Society for the Aged (MUSA), an organisation which works with disadvantaged older people in the Durban area of South Africa. MUSA's aim is to help older people remain independent by providing services such as a home-based health care programme. The Literacy Programme for Older People (OPL) was developed in response to a demand by the older people with whom MUSA works. At a participatory needs assessment, the older citizens decided that they needed to learn how to read and write. Literacy in KwaZulu, their mother tongue, and English would help them to handle tasks such as paying bills or using public transport, meeting with the officials at the pension office on a more equal ▶

▶ footing and organising social and income-generating activities. For the older learners, literacy is one of the skills they need in order to gain more control over their lives. A literacy course, which now runs in two townships, has been designed and a curriculum has been developed by the older people. The course focuses on the literacy-related tasks and the literacy uses in daily life including aspects such as filling in forms or understanding a prescription. Teaching is in KwaZulu and English, acknowledging the demand from the older people for both languages. Facilitators are older people from the community who have been trained to teach their peers. Not only has participation in this project enabled members to learn to read and write, but it has also conferred less obvious benefits of literacy: status, greater access to their rights with regards to government pensions, greater security and personal fulfilment. The project is being supported by Help Age International and the Department for International Development in the UK.

The above examples from South Africa and Scotland are very different. However, some of the issues raised, as the next example will also reveal, are similar despite the differences in social context and cultural environment. One important consideration is how to set up learning opportunities for older people which are simultaneously empowering, supportive of their own initiatives, and which let them a share in decision-making within the project.

One area of great interest today to older learners is computers and computer literacy. Bilan University Programme in Applied Gerontology has a programme for Third Age learning where over 3000 senior citizens have learned how to work with computers. The university is also compiling a bibliography on older learners and computers.

The University runs a research programme on the problems of ageing in society. However, rather than use younger researchers, who might not be the supreme experts in the study of ageing, it is the older people in this programme who are not just the subjects of the research but also those involved in carrying it out. Another programme, called Contact, sends students from the university to visit isolated and house-bound older people. The emphasis in this programme is not on formal education, but on the informal encounter between different generations.

The Senior Community Leadership Programme offers training and retraining for senior members of community organisations who wish to be involved in developing new kinds of social programmes in areas such as education or health.

Recognition of various forms of learning

Learning not only takes place in classrooms or other formal settings but in many and varied situations. The amount of informal, self-organised, unstructured and individual learning most people are involved in is much greater than any provided by formal education.

Older people in particular have accumulated unaccountable hours of informal learning. Whether and how such prior learning can be recognised and accounted for once people enrol in more formal programmes, is an important question. Recognising prior learning also means acknowledging the richness and wisdom of older people's life experiences. It is not enough to give older people access to existing services: it is equally important to create educational environments which recognise and support all forms of learning and all forms of prior experience.

Intergenerational learning

Older citizens have great potential for contributing to the education of the younger generations. However, given the still prevailing negative views of older people we can foresee problems with younger people accepting tuition from their elders. Older people's wisdom and experience is often seen as irrelevant to modern day issues, particularly in the field of technology and communication involving computers and internet. However, as the above example from Bilan University in Israel shows, such an assessment may not always be true.

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The Senior Studies Institute, University of Strathclyde

The success of the Learning in Later Life Programme at the University of Strathclyde led, in 1991, to the setting up of the Senior Studies Institute, the first of its type in Scotland. The Institute has a range of activities and learning programmes for older citizens. Learning starts at beginners level and goes up to first year undergraduate university level. Students can then, if they wish, pursue formal undergraduate studies.

Collaborative research, skills training workshops, intergenerational activities and voluntary projects are essential parts of the above Institute's work. Its founders strongly believe in the benefits of linking the older people to the younger generations. One voluntary project exemplifies the possible contributions of older adults to helping younger people cope with specific difficult circumstances in their lives. This project is located in Scotland's spinal injury unit in the Glasgow hospital. Many patients stay here for periods of 6 months or even a year. Very often the patients are young people who have had serious accidents and who must now adjust to a life very different from their previous, often sports oriented and very active one. A group of volunteers was trained by the Senior Studies Institute to work with the patients towards the end of their rehabilitation programme, trying to help them get over this traumatic time and adapt to their new life. The older volunteers particularly support the patients in their attempts to get on with, and find new meanings in, their lives.

Based on the concept of collaboration and partnership with older people, programmes such as the examples from Scotland and Israel show that it is possible to develop projects that involve both younger and older persons. Such initiatives can be beneficial to both generations. The Senior Studies Institute not only profits the older learners, it has also been positive for the younger students at the University who now accept their older colleagues as an integral part of the college.

Conclusion

Towards a Society of All Ages is the official subtitle of the 1999 UN Year of Older People. As the workshop emphasised, such a motto is indeed highly appropriate and urgently needed.

Older people have a lot to say and should be enabled to have a continuing voice in society. It is time the older generations were no longer marginalised, and their experience and knowledge were valued. Education has a major part to play in this process, enabling older people not only to pursue their own learning aspirations, but also to share their experience with others and to contribute their skills to their communities.

We need to direct our efforts towards overcoming an image of the elderly as distinct and different from the rest of society. Older people are a part of society, a part from which the younger generations have much to learn.

It is crucial to affirm that the right to education is a human right for all. Education for older people needs commitment from the State and all institutions; the State has a responsibility to provide education for older citizens.

Governments should make adult education for the elderly population a priority.

Their commitment to the goal of "Education for All by the year 2000" must mean policies to include older persons. The adult education sector must receive more support from the government. Governments should not retreat from their responsibility towards providing education for their older citizens. Available resources must be invested in learning opportunities for older people, in addition to primary education and vocational training. State-sponsored literacy education should include older people in addition to those of working age. People should not be made redundant on account of age. Access to vocational retraining programmes should not be denied to older people. Companies should not argue that it is inefficient to train workers who are close to their retirement age.

Older people need to be given the right to make decisions about their own learning. Education which is aimed at empowering older people to remain creative and independent, cannot be one which simply assumes it can supply older people's needs and denies them the right to choose what and how they want to learn. Such programmes need to build on the resources, the creativity and the experience of older people.

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Learning between and about different cultures and population groups and between and among different generations needs to be encouraged.

We need to be aware of the ever prevailing tendency to exclude older people from educational opportunities.

Excerpts from Learning and ageing populations: A discussion guide. CONFINTEA, UNESCO, Hamburg 1997

Our societies are not well prepared to handle the historically new demographic conditions. To change their policies in such a way that economic strength, social cohesion and human dignity are reinforced is one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century. With this perspective in mind, the General Assembly of the United Nations Organisations has declared 1999 as the International Year of Older People.

First of all, the traditional stereotypes of later life should be challenged at every opportunity. A new vision must be promoted showing older adults as autonomous and responsible persons and as a productive force in society. Age discrimination and exclusion from purposeful activity must be eliminated. It is in that perspective that new policies and measures for adult education need to be developed.

Older adults should be actively involved in their own learning and education. As adults they are responsible for their learning. They must be treated as such and educational support has to contribute to their empowerment.

It must be recognised that much of the learning of adults takes place in informal settings such as the family, the workplace, homes, social services, health centres, etc. That is of the greatest importance, especially for those adults who never had the opportunity to profit well from the formal school system.

The educational challenges of our day are so important that it is necessary to take into consideration the intellectual contribution of everybody to modify the conditions of learning. Older adults still play and can play an important role as helpers in learning processes; not only as resource persons but also as mentors and coaches for the young and the old and as designers and managers of educational opportunities. The helping potential of the older generation must be released and reinforced.

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The CONFINTEA logo, designed by Michael Smitheram of Australia, represents the lines on the palm of a hand. These lines are universal and yet different for each subject. They celebrate cultural diversity and the joy of learning.

Theme 8

Adult education and groups with special needs

Booklets under this theme:

a Adult learning and ageing populations
b Migrant education
c Adult learning for prisoners
d Making education accessible and available to all persons with disabilities